

# Sri Lanka: Tamil parties launch communal campaign to divert social tensions

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The Tamil People's Council (TPC), a Tamil nationalist organisation, has called an *Ezhuga Thamizh* (Rise up Tamils) protest on February 10 in Batticaloa in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province. The TPC held a similar demonstration in Jaffna last September.

The purpose of the protest is to divert the growing social tensions among Tamil workers and the poor along communal lines and divide them from their class brothers and sisters in the country's south.

The TPC was established in 2015 by a section of the parliamentary opposition Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the Tamil National People's Front (TNPF) and various university academics and civil society formations. The TPC is headed by C.V. Wigneswaran, a leading member of the TNA and the Northern Provincial Council's chief minister.

While senior TNA officials, such as R. Sambandan and M. A. Sumanthiran, have distanced themselves from the TPC campaign, Wigneswaran claims that the protests are strengthening the TNA.

TPC co-leader T. Vasantharajah told the media the group believes that the "political aspirations of people in North and East can be strongly conveyed to the government of this country and to the 'international,' especially to the UNHRC [UN Human Rights Council] via the *Ezhuga Thamizh*."

The TPC's demands include greater powers for the North and East provinces, an international war crimes probe and the release of Tamil political prisoners. It is also calling for a ban on new Sinhalese settlements and the spread of Buddhist influence in the North and East, withdrawal of the Sri Lankan military from these provinces, and the return of civilian land seized by the military.

Claims that the TPC represents the "aspirations of people in the North and East of Sri Lanka" are a lie.

The organisation speaks, not for oppressed Tamil and Muslim workers and poor, but for the Tamil bourgeoisie and sections of the upper-middle class. Its demand for a "federal solution" seeks a power-sharing arrangement between Colombo and the Tamil elites in the North and East for the joint exploitation of the Tamil working class.

The TPC's calls for the withdrawal of military from the North and East and the release of political prisoners are to exploit the anger of Tamil masses and divert it into appeals for support from imperialist countries, such as the US and India, the major regional power.

As the name *Ezhuga Thamizh* implies, the TPC protests are a communalist response to anti-Tamil provocations by Sinhala chauvinist groups in the country's south. Sinhala extremists headed by former President Mahinda Rajapakse claim that the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was militarily crushed in May 2009, is being revived. Rajapakse hopes to topple the government and return to power through this reactionary campaign.

During the January 2015 presidential election, the TNA and other Tamil parties and groups, including those now in the TPC, backed the US-orchestrated regime-change operation to replace Rajapakse with Maithripala Sirisena.

Washington wanted Rajapakse to cut his government's close political and economic relations with Beijing and for Sri Lanka to be integrated into the US war preparations against China. The TNA leadership, and figures such as R. Sambandan and M.A. Sumanthiran, were fully involved in this campaign.

The TPC's claim that the US, India and other international powers, as well as the UNHRC would help Tamil people, is false to the core. These powers backed the communal war by successive Colombo

governments against the LTTE because it suited their geo-strategic interests.

The UNHRC is a tool of imperialism, particularly the US. In 2015, it agreed that the newly-appointed government of Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe could conduct its own war crimes probe, in other words, suppress the truth about Sri Lanka's civil war. The TNA supported this move.

The TNA and other Tamil groups campaigned for Sirisena's election, insisting that he would end the anti-democratic methods of the Rajapakse government and end catastrophic living conditions produced by the war. Two years on, Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala people throughout Sri Lanka face ongoing attacks on their democratic rights and living conditions as the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government imposes the social austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund.

Parallel to the growing struggles and strikes in the south, municipal cleaning workers, health workers, voluntary teachers and graduates in the north have regularly demonstrated for permanent appointments and jobs. "Rehabilitated," former LTTE soldiers have protested at the civil security office demanding jobs while Jaffna University students are campaigning against the government's education cuts.

Protest hunger strikes in Vavuniya by the relatives of persons who "disappeared" during the war have also won considerable support among workers, students and the poor. A group of people is maintaining a sit-down protest at Keppapilavu near Kilinochchi, demanding that the military return agricultural land that belongs to the villagers.

Neither the TPC nor TNA has supported these struggles. The TNA is politically discredited in the eyes of thousands of Tamil workers and the poor for backing every social attack of the pro-US government in Colombo and defending it.

TPC leader Vasantharajah, in fact, recently warned the government and the TNA that "people [in the north and east] are now trying to take their own decisions and act, ignoring the leaders."

Similarly, an editorial in *Virakesari*, the Colombo-based Tamil daily, noted that the government's inability to find "a solution for the daily and basic problems of people, has created a deep discontent among Tamils. Because of this, a situation is growing that the Tamil people, who feel ignored, are mobilising

against the leadership of TNA which supports the government's activities."

All sections of the ruling elite—Tamil and Sinhala alike—are acutely nervous about the development of a unified struggle of the working class across ethnic lines.

The working class must reject the TPC's communal campaign. The TPC and TNA defend the interests of the capitalist class and serve the imperialist powers. Most of the TNA leadership hoped that US Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton would win the US presidential election, claiming this would provide an opportunity to "solve problems of Tamils." After Republican Donald Trump won the election, the TNA leadership said they would appeal for his help.

Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim workers must reject all factions of the Sri Lankan capitalist class and fight for their basic democratic rights and living standards on the basis of an international socialist perspective. This is the program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which has a long and principled record fighting against Colombo's communalist war, consistently demanding the withdrawal of the military from the North and East and defending the democratic rights of the Tamil people.

The SEP fights for a workers' and peasants' government in the form of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of the broader struggle for a United Socialist States of South Asia and internationally.



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